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Preface

I like to go to places I have never been before, and they don't have to be exotic or expensive. A brilliant blue alpine lake, a breezy coastal path, or a bustling Saturday morning swap meet are all exciting destinations for me. Seeing new things is good for the mind and liberating for one's spirit, and travel is a welcome escape from the "routine" that, like a vacuum, tries to pull us in each day.

My wife, Lisa, and I have traveled to Europe many times, and there it is very common to see locals walking or riding bicycles to shop, to work, to the train station, everywhere. In fact, many don't have cars, or if they do, they seldom drive. Europeans can be found cycling or strolling on ribbonlike paths that meander through the countryside, and they move along with just the birds, the breeze, and the horizon to keep them company. Each time I see this, I imagine they must be making the short journey on that path to the next town to visit the open-air market, to patronize a favorite pub, or to call on a friend. I personally think it would be wonderful to be able to trek on a well-used trail through a thickly wooded forest, beside a country meadow, or along a shimmering shoreline and a very short time later be in another little burg.

I also enjoy learning about very old stuff such as arrowheads, postcards, musical instruments, household items, and firearms. When I see and touch these things, I can't help but think about the men and women who used them so long ago. I believe that when I hold a very old object, I connect for a few moments with the former owner: we both felt the weight of a heavy iron tool or the smooth texture of a well-worn coin, and together we understood the meaning of the romantic passages in a book of poetry or the stimulating phrasing in a patriotic essay. The two of us shared similar sensations or emotions

relating to these things and it's as if the events happened simultaneously—yet I was on one side of a doorway and he or she was nearby but on the opposite side. It is intriguing to think that I can see and handle objects that have come through that opening, from the past to the present, but the door prevents me from going through it into the long-ago and talking with the people who made, possessed, or used them. If I could speak with those men and women, I would inquire about the artifacts they left behind and I would also ask about their lives and the world as it was. What was it like to build a castle or live in a log cabin or sail aboard a tall-masted wooden ship? How did it feel to be a soldier fighting at Gettysburg, to be a pioneer walking the Oregon Trail, or to discover that the earth travels around the sun? How many craftsmen did it take to build the pyramids, the Parthenon, or Notre Dame? Who were they and how long did it take in each case?

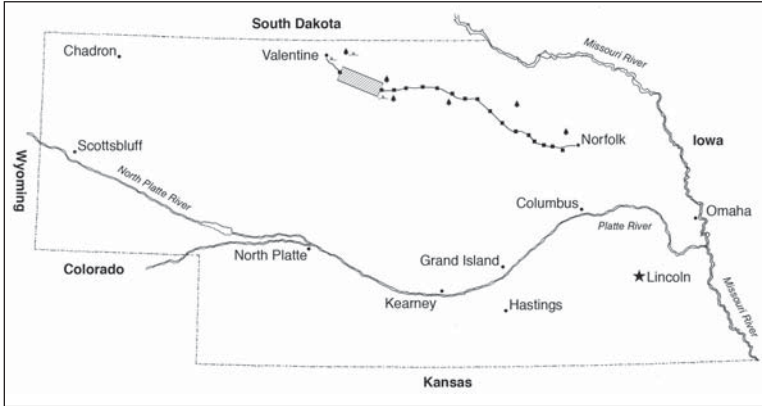
Whenever I can travel somewhere new and learn about those who lived in that place years before, I am thrilled! The combination of new vistas and tangible history is truly stimulating.

I believed for a long time that walking or cycling to engage in an adventure in my homeland was impossible because of a lack of developed rural paths or the immense distances one would have to travel to get to a new and interesting place. After discovering Nebraska's magnificent Cowboy Trail, I now know that my beliefs were unfounded. This hiking and biking trail was, in its past life, a train line, and there are lots of interesting and friendly people; tidy, small communities spaced closely together; and beautiful bits of scenery along its length.

The trail's communities are not only picturesque and inviting places but also fascinating sources of history, and the railroad often played a role in personal sagas in those towns. Throughout this book, I have weaved into the descriptions of the way the true tales of queens, criminals, stars, soldiers, and inventors who traversed this route at some point in the past. Like the scent of perfume worn by someone unseen but nearby, their intimate stories of living, loving, struggling, and dying still linger all along the train line on which they so dearly depended. Take care to think about these men and women as you use the Cowboy Trail, and breathe in their stories.

Introduction

Planning for the Trip



Nebraska and the Cowboy Trail

The Route

THE COWBOY TRAIL stretches 321 miles across the northern part of Nebraska. It begins in Norfolk, in the northeast area of the state, and extends to Chadron in the northwest. The trail follows the route of the old Cowboy Line, which was used by the Fremont, Elkhorn & Missouri Valley and later the Chicago & North Western railroads between about 1870 and 1992.

Nebraska geography changes dramatically from one end of the state to the other, and this adds to the adventure. In the east the soil is black, rich, and fertile and supports a wealth of grasses, flowers, and trees. In the west sand is abundant, the environment is more arid, and very different plants thrive there. In between, the transition from one to another is gradual and there are plenty of interesting sights for trail users. Because of these changes, each of the sections of the trail

is interesting and attractive in its own way, and I can't say that one is better than any other.

Because the Cowboy Line was originally intended for trains, you'll find that the entire route is relatively flat, which makes the journey quite pleasurable. Where there were hills or valleys in the surrounding geography, the engineers who developed the course many years ago cut straight through the grade, built bridges, or bypassed problem areas. For example, the path in Norfolk is 1,518 feet above sea level and at Thatcher, west over 180 miles away, the trail is at 2,664 feet above sea level, which results in an average change of just over 6 feet per mile. As I said, inclines or declines along the trail are few and these will be almost imperceptible.

My journeys take me from Norfolk through Battle Creek, Meadow Grove, Tilden, Oakdale, Neligh, Clearwater, Ewing, Inman, O'Neill, Emmet, Atkinson, Stuart, Newport, Bassett, Long Pine, and Ainsworth. This is a continuous and relatively smooth-surfaced 144-mile stretch of the trail. The next section of the trail that is surfaced begins 32 miles west of Ainsworth at Arabia, a ghost town. It is 13 miles in length and leads into the city of Valentine. In total, walkers and cyclists have over 150 glorious miles of the Cowboy Trail to explore today.

The Nebraska Game and Parks Commission's long-term plan is to convert the entire 321 miles into a usable hiking/biking path over the next several years. Renovating 1 mile of the trail costs approximately \$30,000 and involves removing the iron rails and wooden ties, scraping off the aggregate stone filler, rebuilding or repairing bridges, adding signage, and spreading and compacting the new stone surfacing. I have traveled on some segments before they were completed and would advise you not to repeat my error. On some unimproved sections the path can be very rough and often the grass is quite high, making it hard to see what hazard might be lurking ahead. On others the path has had the consistency of a sand dune, making it very difficult for walkers or bikers to get any traction at all. Currently, there are two unsurfaced sections of the trail. As mentioned earlier, one is 32 miles long and is just west of Ainsworth and the other is 132 miles in length and runs from Valentine to Chadron. Both will open bit by

bit in the future, and when they do, this will result in lots more fun for all trail users.

To accommodate those souls exploring the trail, I describe in each chapter of this book where a person can camp, get a place to sleep, find a grocery store, or purchase a hot meal in the towns along the way. You will also find descriptions for a few destinations that are within 20 or 30 miles of the trail. These places have been highlighted because they are Nebraska treasures that will complement your holiday adventure and add to your enjoyment of the area.

I make it clear which businesses I have visited or stayed in, because I offer a review of the establishment. I don't provide details on the hotel franchise operations that exist in the towns along the way, as I think you can easily get information on them from the Internet. There are lots of small motels along the route that don't have a Web presence and probably aren't found in many national directories, so I have provided phone numbers for these rural inns. Look for them in alphabetical order by town in the "Names and Numbers" section at the end of each chapter. If you visit a nearby attraction or patronize a motel, restaurant, or pub along the way that I have not, I would appreciate reading your comments about the place. You may e-mail those to me at terryk@unk.edu.

I believe that walks of 10 to 15 miles or rides of 20 to 30 miles per day are manageable, but keep in mind that many of the towns on the trail are very small and have limited services; this more than anything else should dictate the length of your daily journeys. You should also consider the levels of fitness and the ages of those in your party during pre-trip planning. By the way, walking or riding to a turnaround point and renting a car one-way to carry you back to your starting place is not really an option, given that rental agencies do not exist here in great numbers.

Trail Composition

There are two types of surfaces on the trail: pavement and crushed limestone. In the communities of Norfolk, O'Neill, Ainsworth, and Valentine, the trail is actually paved like a sidewalk, which is a real

treat for cyclists. Generally, the paving starts at one side of these towns and ends at the other. In Norfolk, however, the paving stretches approximately $2\frac{1}{4}$ miles outside of the city limits.

The majority of the surfacing on the trail is crushed rock. The largest stones are actually about the size of a green pea and the filler is a limestone dust. Generally, this material is well compacted and is pretty smooth. When walking at a comfortable pace, I can usually cover about 3 miles per hour. I have ridden my bike on this surface after heavy rains and the surface remains quite firm, but the moisture in the aggregate does slow me down a bit. The best speed I can consistently maintain on the trail when it is dry is $9\frac{1}{2}$ MPH and about 8 MPH when it is wet.

En route, you will cross many bridges, all of which have been modified for hikers and cyclists. Some of these are no more than ten feet long and some are much longer. All have been fitted with sturdy side rails approximately four feet high and all have plank flooring. No need to worry about anyone of any age getting a foot or wheel caught between the planks or slipping between the boards on the side rails—it isn't going to happen. Several of these bridges cross slow-moving and quiet rivers or creeks. Others cross wetlands, ponds, or depressions in the earth.

Throughout the length of the route, the path is ten feet wide regardless of whether the surface is pavement, crushed limestone, or bridge planking. Two people can walk or even cycle side by side and chat without any problem.

Packing and Prepping

No matter how you choose to explore the trail, take plenty of water. You'll find places to refill bottles in any of the small towns along the route, but I have never seen a single spigot or pump in the countryside between any of them. You should also carry a raincoat just in case the weather changes. Taking along a cell phone isn't a bad idea either, but remember that the trail traverses a very sparsely populated part of Nebraska—so don't be surprised if your reception is poor or nonexistent in some places. When the trains were consistently in use,

the shoulders immediately on either side of the tracks were cleared of trees so the locomotives could pass without being obstructed by fallen branches. Still today, you'll find very few stretches of the trail that are shaded, so pack a hat and sunglasses.

When riding the trail, I rely on a Trek 800 Mountain Track, a pretty simple bike with, figuratively speaking, no bells and whistles. I have considered installing dampeners on my front forks and seat post, but not having them has never stopped me from going. I do have liners inside my tires to protect the tubes from stickers. These are a must. The Nebraska countryside comes complete with scenic views, lots of wildlife, and tough, pointy thorns that will eventually work their way through the thin rubber in the spaces between the treads of a mountain bike tire. If you don't line your tires or have an alternative form of protection in mind, you'll find yourself spending more time fixing flats than riding. I carry a tube repair kit but have never had to use it. Common sense dictates that you always wear a helmet.

Nebraska Weather

Prior to planning your Cowboy Trail adventure, you need to consider the temperature. Nebraska is a land of extremes; in the summer the mercury can rise to above 100°F, and in the winter temperatures can drop way below zero. Having lived in the state for some time, I suggest that you not even consider a hiking or biking adventure here between November and March. During the "window of opportunity," the high and low temperatures average about 63°F and 38°F in April and October; in midsummer, expect average highs of 87°F and lows of 64°F. These figures are for Madison County, where Norfolk is located. For more detailed information, go to <http://arc.norfolkne.com/nclimate.htm>.

Check the forecast before leaving for a day on the trail, especially between April and October. During these months, it would not be uncommon for a thunderstorm or tornado to develop, and they are dangerous. If you get caught in one of these, stay close to the ground; don't hide under a tree, as that greatly increases your risk of being struck by lightning. I would probably hunker down on the north bank of the trail, because the weather in the state generally comes from the

southwest and the embankment might give me some protection from strong winds and debris. In the case of a hailstorm and as a last resort, I would take my chances and hide under one of the many bridges along the way or any cover I could find.

Flora and Fauna

Nebraska is home to numerous varieties of colorful wildflowers, and an appreciation for these can enhance a trekker's day on the trail. One will see colors ranging from white at one end of the continuum through yellow, pink, red, blue, and on to purple. I have taken care to describe some of the flowers I have seen along the way. Plants here don't all blossom at once, so you may not see each one I write about unless you stagger your trips throughout the growing season. No matter when you visit, though, you're guaranteed a unique presentation of colors and textures.

Trail users will also learn quickly that there is a lot of wildlife to be seen in the northern part of the state. The largest animals you will spot in unfenced land will be deer, which usually flee as soon as they become aware of your presence. You might also see prairie dogs, foxes, squirrels, and raccoons. There are lots of different kinds of large birds such as heron, grouse, pheasant, turkey, geese, ducks, and owls. Smaller birds will include meadowlarks, red-winged blackbirds, killdeer, doves, crows, robins, and many, many others. In all the time I have spent on the trail, I have seen only a couple of snakes and they were quite small, nonpoisonous, and easily spotted right in the middle of the path. Keep in mind that there are poisonous snakes in the area, but if you keep to the trail you probably won't have an unpleasant encounter with one, since they tend to like shady places where they can escape the midday heat. In the cooler months and before they become dormant, they seek underground dens or caves where they congregate with other snakes to share body heat and stay warm.

Getting Started

When I travel the whole route, I usually start in Norfolk, which is about 2½ hours northwest of Omaha, and travel west. Obviously,

you can start anywhere along the route that you choose; don't feel as though you have to do the whole trail in one trip. I have often traveled there just to ride or walk a section or two for fun and exercise, and to relax.

U.S. Highway 275 and the Cowboy Trail basically parallel one another as they proceed west from Norfolk. At O'Neill, 275 becomes Highway 20 and this extends to the end of the existing surfaced trail in Valentine. On your first trip, I'd suggest beginning at the trailhead in Ta-Ha-Zouka Park in Norfolk. From Omaha, follow 275 northwest through Valley, Fremont, and West Point until you arrive in Norfolk. From Lincoln, travel north on Highway 77 through Ceresco and Wahoo and change to 275 in Fremont. Interstate 80 is the main thoroughfare in Nebraska, so if you are coming from Colorado, Iowa, or other states, take I-80 to Lincoln and then proceed north to Fremont where you'll connect with Highway 275.